

*REBUILDING NIFL
TO MEET FUTURE NEEDS*

**A New and Innovative Agency
with a Broader Mission**

**A Discussion Paper
by
Forrest P. Chisman
and Gail Spangenberg**

October 8, 2009



Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy

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REBUILDING NIFL TO MEET FUTURE NEEDS

A New and Innovative Agency with a Broader Mission

SUMMARY

One major report after another shows that the United States needs a large, innovative, and effective adult education and workforce skills system. It is essential to our national security, economic stability, and democratic way of life. To address this need fully a leadership agency focused on a singular national goal is required, one with a legislative mandate to perform strategic planning and other coordination functions between and among federal agencies and public and private sector groups. Such an agency can accomplish its mission only if it is supported by a strong governance structure. CAAL proposes that the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) be reauthorized with a new and broader mission, mode of operation, and governance structure, and that these transformational elements be clearly set forth in the reauthorizing legislation. This will effectively create a new agency (with a new name, National Institute for Adult Learning, NIFAL) in place of the current National Institute for Literacy. NIFL, as chartered by the 1991 and 1998 Acts, might have been an important agency in the adult education field, but it was handicapped from the outset. Redeveloped as discussed below, NIFAL will be able to take on the essential and far larger task of building an adult education and workforce skills system to meet the nation's 21st Century needs.

A. INTRODUCTION

In its 2008 report, *Reach Higher, America*, the blue ribbon National Commission on Adult Literacy concluded that: “The quasi-independent, interagency nature of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) makes it a unique and valuable resource...” The Commission urged that NIFL's authority and resources be strengthened to perform a variety of functions that are essential to the development of a national adult education and workforce skills system. This includes national leadership in research and development, interagency coordination, information dissemination activities, and technological innovation.

As the designated follow-up agent for the Commission's recommendations, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) initially proposed changes to NIFL's legislated mission statement and governance structure (in April 2009) as part of a detailed side-by-side on how Title I and Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) could be improved to meet the needs of a 21st century workforce. The proposals for NIFL were developed on very short notice, just three months before the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act (AEEGA) was introduced in Congress in mid-July. Subsequently, CAAL convened a meeting of experts to discuss in depth

the need for and future of this unique agency. This paper reflects advice given at that session and subsequently by many other professionals. However, the views expressed are those of CAAL alone. It is also consistent with advice that has appeared in recent publications from several other major sources.¹ The paper sets forth a rationale and specific plan for NIFL's future role. The goal is to develop NIFL – renamed the National Institute for Adult Learning (NIFAL) – into an entity with the authority, mandate, funding, and governance structure required to truly provide needed leadership for 21st century adult education and workforce skills development in America.

B. THE PAST AS PROLOGUE

NIFL was created by the National Literacy Act of 1991. Broadly speaking, there were three major reasons for its creation:

(1) Recognition that support for adult education service was and is provided by multiple federal programs (by some counts as many as 40)² and agencies in several departments – most of them concentrated in the Departments of Education (ED), Labor (DOL), and Health and Human Services (HHS). Each has its own regulations and policies for providing this support and makes use of adult education to achieve different program goals.

(2) The belief that fundamental research in the adult education field is neglected because each of the federal provider agencies invests primarily in research it considers important to its own goals.

(3) The realization that there is no efficient or reliable way for state and local adult education programs or practitioners to obtain available basic information and research findings on how to improve instructional methods, assessment, teacher training, program management and policy, and other topics having to do with improving the quality and quantity of service they provide.

¹ Among these sources are two federal government reports: (1) *Bridges to Opportunity: Federal Adult Education Programs for the 21st Century*, the product of an interagency working group comprised of 13 federal departments and independent agencies (July 2008), published by the U.S. Department of Education. The report recommends that NIFL should be strengthened to perform coordination functions. (2) *Diverse Federal and State Efforts to Support Adult English Language Learning Could Benefit from More Coordination* was issued by the Government Accountability Office (July 2009). It focuses on lack of coordination in federal research on ESL services. In addition, the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act introduced in the House and Senate in July 2009 both reauthorizes NIFL and expands its responsibilities.

² See *Directory of Federal Funding Sources for Adult Education*, Abt Associates (Dunton, Lauren; Alamprese, Judith), Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009.

Congress created NIFL to perform functions it believed no existing entity could perform. It gave NIFL three primary missions: (a) to conduct basic and applied research on issues central to improving the state of the art in adult education service; (b) to create electronic data bases to disseminate information needed to improve service delivery to states, local programs, and literacy practitioners; and (c) to generate ideas about how multiple federal programs (as well as the separate requirements of states) could be better coordinated to be mutually supportive and more efficient (by using common standards and tools, sharing resources, and providing continuity of student services).

When WIA reauthorized NIFL in 1998, it strengthened the coordination component. NIFL was directed “to coordinate support for the provision of literacy and basic skills services across Federal agencies and at the State and local levels” – a function that the 1991 Act had assigned to the ED. [WIA Sec. 242(c)(1)(B)]

Because NIFL was created to perform functions that span the activities and authorities of multiple federal agencies, Congress and the President decided in the 1991 and 1998 Acts that it could not be located in, or managed by, any one of these agencies. As a result, both Acts created an unusual governance structure. They mandated that NIFL should be administered by an interagency agreement among the Secretaries of Education, Labor, and HHS – who were designated the “Interagency Group.” Both Acts also established a NIFL “Advisory Board” of 10 individuals who are not federal employees, appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. Finally, the Acts specified that NIFL should have offices separate from those of any other agency and that its day-to-day operations would be *administered* by a Director with staff employed by the Institute.

NIFL’s “Board” was established to be “advisory” in nature. It was empowered to propose goals, activities, and other operations of NIFL, but these would take effect only if approved by the Interagency Group. Even the appointment of the Director was subject to approval by the Group.

Moreover, because the legislation made no provision for contracting, personnel, and other administrative functions, these were performed at the outset by the Department of Education – until several years ago when ED gave NIFL separate authority to let its own contracts. Funding for NIFL was authorized at \$15 million in the 1991 Act and “such sums as shall be necessary” in

WIA. Its appropriation for adult education activities never exceeded \$6 million. Furthermore, its appropriation has always been part of ED's overall appropriation.

During the past 18 years, although NIFL has operated with limited resources under this governance structure, it has registered some solid accomplishments. Most notably it created LINCS – a series of databases to disseminate information about virtually all aspects of adult education. This system was and is highly valued by practitioners. NIFL also commissioned seminal research on the long-neglected topic of how adult education programs can serve individuals with learning disabilities, and it provided technical assistance and training to help practitioners act on the findings. With its “Equipped for the Future” initiative (adapting the Adult Performance Level project of 1971-76), it provided current comprehensive definitions of the multiple competencies in reading, writing, and math needed by adults in different contexts, laid down the beginnings of an assessment system, and piloted its work in half a dozen states. It initiated the Adult Reading Components Study that involved prestigious researchers in adult education and other fields. Findings from this study were then translated into training for practitioners. And it supported a large number of smaller research and technical assistance projects aiming to improve adult education services. Notable among these was funding for the adult literacy research of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Despite these and other accomplishments, NIFL has not achieved the intended legislative goals in the areas of coordinating adult education services across federal agencies (and states) or establishing a national leadership position as a research center. On the whole, the adult education components of programs in different federal agencies are still highly fragmented as they were when NIFL was first established, and neither NIFL nor any other agency has mounted a substantial effort to coordinate them. Likewise, despite Congressional intent, and for reasons noted below, NIFL has been one of the smaller investors in federal research on adult education. ED's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) and DOL's Education and Training Administration (ETA) have spent relatively large amounts on program research and demonstration projects. In addition, ED's Institute for Education Sciences (IES) has invested twice in assessing the basic skill levels of American adults (the multi-million dollar NALS and NAAL studies). IES also established university-based research centers at the University of

Pennsylvania and Harvard University that have been discontinued. But these and other federal research investments have been made without any apparent strategic vision of what research is most needed to advance adult education as a whole, and without an ongoing commitment to research on particular issues.

Among the most glaring areas of neglect in both research and program coordination are lack of attention to English as a Second Language (ESL) service (the largest component of adult education in the United States) and to adult education instruction in math, writing, and various non-academic skills (all of which employers consistently rank as the most serious basic skills problems of their workers). In addition, there has been limited attention to developing innovative service delivery systems, particularly in the areas of instructional technology and incumbent worker training, or to services for special populations, such as incarcerated adults. In short, the problems that led to NIFL's creation (lack of program coordination and neglect of priority research issues) have not been addressed by anyone.

NIFL's failure to address them has been caused by four forces largely beyond its control:

- **Inadequate Funding.** With annual appropriations that never exceeded \$6 million for adult education, from the beginning NIFL lacked the resources to mount a substantial research program that would fill important gaps in the federal research agenda on adult education, as its authorizing legislation envisioned. Given its other responsibilities (information dissemination, technical assistance, and coordination), it has been able to devote only a few million dollars each year to research and demonstration. At any given time, it could only support a single large effort (such as its work on learning disabilities or its demonstrations with Equipped for the Future) or a few fairly small research studies. As a result, compared to ED and DOL, NIFL has been a small player in adult education research.
- **Lack of Mission Clarity.** NIFL's legislative mission to disseminate information on adult education has been clear (and successfully performed), but its mission to coordinate federal adult education programs has not been. Each of these programs, in several federal departments, has its own authorizing legislation, appropriation, regulations, and staff. NIFL and some departments themselves lack the authority to "coordinate" these

programs in the usual sense of the term – by amending their missions and procedures. In addition, except for ED’s adult education state grant program, virtually all other federal investments in adult education are only one component of larger missions (e.g., DOL helping unemployed people find jobs as quickly as possible). The type of adult education services they require to accomplish those missions take somewhat different forms, because they must be linked to different program contexts. Thus, it has never been clear exactly what the goals of coordinating adult education service in different programs and agencies should be.

These goals might include increasing the efficiency of service provision by adopting common definitions, assessment systems, outcome measures, and student learning plans. Such coordination would reduce the costs of different adult education program components devised to achieve essentially the same purposes even though offered in different program contexts. Another coordination goal might be to more closely articulate the adult education services of different agencies so that students who achieve learning gains in one program can make smoother transitions to others. For example, this would ensure that students who improve their basic skills in short-term occupational training programs gain the skills they need to enter programs that prepare them for postsecondary education. It would also ensure that both types of programs include administrative and student service components to facilitate such transitions. An additional goal might be to adopt longitudinal data systems that *document* the adult education and other learning gains that individual students have achieved in different programs. This would enable students to receive appropriate services when they seek further education and to accumulate a portfolio of their acquired skills for employers. Finally, coordination might have the goal of supporting multi-agency co-investments in research to improve the methods for providing adult education in any context, in order to increase student persistence and accelerate learning gains.

In short, without these other forms of coordination, it is unrealistic to expect that agencies whose primary mission is *not* adult education will fully appreciate or give high priority to the forms and benefits of such coordination. Yet neither NIFL nor any other agency has

clearly defined these forms and benefits. The “collaboration” aspect of NIFL’s mandate has been an abstract goal at best.

- **Divided Governance.** NIFL’s unusual divided governance structure undermines its ability to perform any of its functions well. Because the Interagency Group must approve important decisions by its Board and Director, governance has technically been in the hands of the Group. But, in practice, two other members of the Group (DOL and HHS) have ceded responsibility for NIFL’s management to ED, which in turn has delegated most of its responsibility to OVAE. As a result, NIFL has never been a truly independent or “quasi-independent” agency, as Congress intended. It has been a stepchild of ED.

This has had two important consequences. First, because ED has had the ability to control both NIFL’s operations and budget, NIFL’s activities have been largely an extension of ED’s priorities, especially OVAE’s. This has limited NIFL’s ability to form and implement a coherent agenda. Second, insofar as NIFL has been an extension of ED, the rationale for its existence has been undercut. For example, any attempts by NIFL to coordinate federal literacy programs and research investments would entail coordinating ED’s adult education activities. Under the present governance structure, this would be an instance of the tail trying to wag the dog. And, the notion of NIFL coordinating other agencies under a governance structure that places it within ED’s control would effectively be the type of single agency coordination NIFL was created to overcome.

- **Loss of Adult Focus.** NIFL’s effectiveness was most seriously compromised in 1998 when WIA authorized it to assume responsibility for disseminating findings of “The Partnership for Reading.” The Partnership (an initiative that complemented the No Child Left Behind Act) aimed to provide scientifically based research about techniques for teaching reading to children, with an emphasis on user-friendly materials for parents and teachers.

The intent was to help pre-schoolers and children in the early grades, with a special emphasis on phonics as a means of instruction. Although NIFL subsequently received funds on the order of \$7 million per year from ED to perform these functions, this new

purpose shifted NIFL's center of gravity – away from its exclusive legislatively mandated focus on adult education toward a more general interest in scientifically based reading research for children. In practice, Partnership work dominated the time and attention of NIFL's leadership and Board. It stalled efforts to develop adult education activities. To the chagrin of people throughout the adult education field, during the past eight years or so board appointees were primarily early childhood education specialists with little or no background in adult education. After assuming responsibility for the Partnership, many of NIFL's signature activities were terminated (as in *Equipped for the Future*) or sidelined (in the case of LINC's). NIFL's uphill climb to serve as the adult education leadership agency became impossibly steep.

C. THE NEW IMPERATIVE

The problems that have prevented NIFL from performing some version of the missions authorized in its 1991 and 1998 legislation can be solved by clarifying its mission, strengthening its governance system, increasing funding, and returning the agency to a sole focus on adult education. But it would be shortsighted to make these changes without understanding the new context in which adult education must operate in the decades to come and the new challenges to which it must rise. In this new context, NIFL is not only a useful presence, but if the nation is to address some of its most formidable challenges, it is an *essential* one. Its mission and governance need to be recast so that it can play that role, and its independence is vital. *If NIFL did not exist, it would be necessary to recreate it in some form.*

In recent years a growing number of experts and organizations have concluded that the United States cannot hope to maintain its present standard of living and compete in the global economy without a dramatic increase in the skills of its workforce. The National Commission on Adult Literacy summarized much of the evidence for this and crystallized the conclusion to which it inevitably leads: the nation must mount a massive effort to equip its workers and potential workers with the skills they need. For a large percentage of those individuals, this must include specialized occupational training or postsecondary education to fill the high skilled jobs of the future. President Obama recently expressed support for this goal in an article [July 12, 2009] for the Washington Post. He wrote that one of our highest national priorities must be to create “a firmer, stronger foundation for growth,” and that a major component of that undertaking must be

“to create the jobs of the future within our borders, [and] give our workers the skills and training they need to compete for those jobs.”

The Commission reported that this national imperative cannot be met if we focus solely on retraining existing high-skilled workers for new types of jobs or on improving the performance of our schools. Our existing workforce consists of as many as 88 million low- and under-skilled adults who are not prepared for 21st century jobs. These adults lack the basic and workforce skills to participate in the education and training they require. For example, more than 18 million adults in the labor force have no high school diploma. More than 18 million have limited English proficiency. Some 51 million high school graduates have no postsecondary education and most are deficient to some extent in being ready for college or jobs. To meet the nation’s economic challenges, we must upgrade their basic and applied skills and set them on career pathways to workforce readiness through occupational training and postsecondary education.

A primary Commission finding is that the nation must transform its present adult education and literacy system into an adult education and workforce skills system that links the traditional adult education goals of improving basic skills to occupational training and postsecondary education in innovative ways. The Commission believes that as a matter of national security and economic stability, the mission of adult education must be expanded to focus far more on preparing low-skilled adults for job and college readiness.

It is within this enlarged adult education context that NIFL, renamed the National Institute for Adult Learning (NIFAL), should be considered. This new context gives NIFAL a far larger significance than ever before.

D. THE PATH AHEAD

A major national effort at all levels of government and by the private sector is essential if we are to transform our existing adult education system, including more emphasis on service to low-skilled adults. We should go about it in a way that links the system more closely to all other components of our education and job training system. This is something we have never done before or even aspired to. But it can be done. Across America local adult education programs and

a few states have pioneered career pathway programs for low skilled adults.³ They have taught us much about what must be done at the operational level and about what remains to be done. But, at most, these exemplary efforts serve only a few tens of thousands of adults nationwide. The national challenge is to fill the gaps in knowledge and practice they have identified and take them to scale by building a system that will serve tens of millions.

This requires close and innovative *partnerships* between adult educators and the primary providers of occupational training and postsecondary education at national and state levels. These primary providers include the various job training programs supported by WIA Title I, community colleges, vocational institutes, unions, and employers (who are not only the customers for a more highly skilled workforce, but potentially the largest investors in workforce training). But more than partnerships among these groups will be required. Judging from the experience of existing career pathway programs, building an adult education and workforce skills system on a large scale will require a much larger investment in guidance and counseling to help low skilled adults navigate career pathway systems. Support services are also critically important – to help adults overcome the barriers to participation created by the demands of work and family that virtually all adults face. These additional components are sometimes provided in Title I and TANF programs, but too rarely offered to adult learners by any programs at all.

In short, a wider range of education and workforce development institutions need to do business in new ways if they are to develop an effective nationwide system of career pathways for low-skilled adults. Adult education programs will have to develop new goals, services, procedures, and tools of the trade. At the same time, public and private job training and postsecondary programs will need to implement new policies and practices that support adult education and incorporate it more effectively into their work. Neither adult educators nor the providers of other career pathway services can succeed in pursuing these new directions without working together much more closely.

³ For examples of some of these programs see: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy's *EXPANDING HORIZONS: Pacesetters in Adult Education for Work* (June, 2009, available from www.caalusa.org), and the National Center for Education and the Economy's series titled *One Step Forward* (September 2009, available from www.jff.org).

Most efforts to link adult education with career pathways have consisted of demonstration programs or provisions in other initiatives launched by federal agencies to support their primary missions. These efforts are usually of limited duration and scope, and they are rarely designed or implemented through extensive partnerships with other agencies. Collectively, they comprise a fragmented, ad hoc response to the need to build an adult education and workforce skills system.

E. THE NEW MISSION: NIFL TO NIFAL

As noted above, any plan for NIFL's future must be developed as part of a national imperative to create a large and innovative adult education and workforce skills system. Creating such a system will require coordination and collaboration on an unprecedented scale between adult education and training and many allied fields. No existing public or private agency has the mission, focus, or resources to coordinate efforts of so many different partners as they take on these new challenges. Because of the scope and complexity of the coordinating function, an independent agency focused on building the new system in all its many dimensions needs to fill that critical role.

ED's adult education state grant program as well as most of its sponsored research has been supporting traditional adult education services rather than developing the new types of service required to meet the nation's workforce needs. Moreover, education in any form is a secondary priority for virtually all other public and private workforce development agencies. Performing their core missions is more than a full-time job for both ED and the other agencies, and each has a large agenda of issues it must address to accomplish its mission. Yet there is a clear need to form partnerships and coordinate activities among the array of public and private undertakings at the federal, state, and local levels so as to ensure that low-skilled adults are able to pursue career pathways. Many federal players may consider this type of coordination to be of high importance. They may be more than willing to participate in the joint ventures it will require, and many are likely to welcome a systematic way to align and coordinate their work with other agencies. But it is unrealistic and unfair to expect already over-burdened agencies to take the leadership in coordination.

The bottom line is that the coordination required to build a national adult education and workforce skills system can only be carried out by an entity that is not bound by the

responsibilities and priorities of any of the existing departmental agencies. This group must have the mandate and resources to provide coordination leadership that will bring about far better and more extensive service to low-skilled adults as its top priority.

NIFL was created to be an institution of this kind, and even though it has not lived up to its promise, it is already authorized by WIA to coordinate federal and state efforts in adult education. CAAL believes that the most effective way to strengthen NIFAL's essential coordination functions is to recast NIFL's mission statement and governance structure so that it can perform those functions. But whether we build on the existing NIFL or must recreate it as NIFAL from scratch, NIFAL's legislatively mandated mission (or "purpose," as often stated in legislative language) should be:

To serve as the nation's leadership agency for the development of an adult education and workforce skills system that will enable low skilled and minimally proficient adults to enter postsecondary education and jobs as required for the 21st century economy.

To serve adults exclusively (as the 1991 Act intended). This should be explicitly stated in legislation. All authority to serve the educational needs of children (for which many other venues exist) should be revoked. All of the programs for children administered by the current NIFL (such as those related to The Partnership for Reading) should be transferred to other ED agencies.

To accomplish its enlarged mission, NIFL should be legislatively mandated to perform the following tasks (often expressed as "duties" in legislative language):

- Develop a comprehensive and detailed 10-year strategic plan to create an adult education and workforce skills system that meets the nation's needs, based on the recommendations of public and private agencies, and submit that plan to the President, Congress, all affected agencies, programs, practitioners, and the general public.
- Monitor progress toward implementing that Plan, and issue an annual progress report to the President, Congress, affected agencies, programs, practitioners, and the general public.

- Evaluate periodically the effectiveness of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act (when enacted into law) and/or to related provisions in the reauthorized WIA and, as appropriate, make recommendations for adjustments in the legislation and its implementation to the President and Congress.⁴
- Recommend to the President, Congress, and affected agencies at the federal, state, and local levels innovative policies and methods, additional funding, and operating procedures required to implement the Plan.
- Assist in implementing that Plan by: facilitating communication among federal, state, local public and private agencies about their initiatives, achievements, and requirements; developing mechanisms to improve collaboration among public and private agencies; serving as a partner with these agencies in conducting the needed research, development, and technical assistance (through joint ventures including co-investment in high priority projects); and serving as an advocate for public and private agencies as they work to implement their components of the plan.
- Identify and support innovative methods for implementing the Plan (such as the increased use of technology for instruction, program management, and professional development).
- Carry out research, development, and technical assistance on issues where no single agency or group of agencies can perform essential functions to carry out the Plan.
- Disseminate information about, and provide technical assistance for, adopting best practices and other essential topics to adult education and workforce skills practitioners and others in the field.

All of these tasks are variations on the “coordination” mission that has long been a part of NIFL’s legislative mandate. For the reasons discussed above, the meaning of that mission has been unclear, and it has lacked a sense of urgency. But in the new national context, there is a critical, unmet need to coordinate adult education with other services. Assigning this function to

⁴ In Section 213(4)(K) of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act (AEEGA), the AEEGA calls for such an evaluation (with a special emphasis on “performance measures”) not later than four years after the date of enactment.”

NIFAL will provide a clear and focused purpose for its coordination mission, as well as its other activities. This new mandate, in turn, should go a long way toward overcoming some of the major problems that have prevented NIFL from being a fully effective agency in the past.

[Together with the governance changes proposed below, this new coordination mission will transform NIFL into a very different agency, and it calls for a more appropriate name. In recognition of this, the material that follows refers to the reformulated NIFL as NIFAL (the National Institute for Adult Learning).]

Of course, neither NIFAL nor any other agency can coordinate the development of an adult education and workforce skills system by *dictating* the policies and practices that ought to be adopted by so many different public and private adult education and workforce development agencies. But NIFAL will provide a mechanism to facilitate collaboration among them with the goal of expanding opportunities for low-skilled adults to advance in the world of work. NIFAL can help them target their differing areas of responsibility and expertise toward this goal.

NIFAL should use four primary tools to perform this distinctive coordination role: (1) strategic planning, (2) support for existing efforts, (3) new initiatives that provide common services, and (4) a special commitment to improving the state of the art in adult education.

(1) Strategic Planning

Whereas coordination of traditional adult education services was a desirable goal, coordination is *essential* for creating the effective new national adult education and workforce skills system with its substantially larger service responsibilities. As noted, such a system requires so many different public and private agencies at all levels to form partnerships and find new ways of operating on a large scale. No one of these agencies knows what the others must do in this new more integrated system, let alone what they themselves should do.

The most important function of strategic planning for an adult education and workforce skills system is to construct a road map for how public and private agencies starting from different destinations can take various routes to arrive at the same place. Who should do what and when should they do it? What actions, policies, research, and resources will this require?

Strategic planning for these purposes cannot be a top-down process. NIFAL must draw on input from as many sources as possible. It should rely heavily on the federal agencies that support various aspects of adult education and workforce development. But it must also rely on input from other levels of government and the private sector.

The resulting Plan should be as detailed as possible and subject to revision as new events unfold and new understanding is gained from research and practice. By its nature, it cannot be a “consensus” document in the sense that all the necessary partners are expected to sign off on it. This would be an endless process resulting in a lowest common denominator plan. For the Plan to be strong and precise, it must speak with a clear, single voice. In the end it should be NIFAL’s product. But the collaborative planning process itself should lay a solid common foundation. At the very least, such a Plan will serve as a point of reference for all participants engaged in the massive task of human resource development. And it should enable NIFAL to organize and monitor its efforts to support the development of such a system.

(2) Support for Implementation

Strategic planning by itself is not the only form of coordination required to create a coherent and integrated adult education and workforce skills system. NIFAL will accomplish very little if it simply issues a Strategic Plan and then walks away in the hope that the different participating entities will act on that Plan. NIFAL must also actively promote and provide support for activities to implement the Plan.

Creating Communities of Leaders. Ideally, NIFAL should carry out its work in a way that creates communities of leaders, planners and practitioners who are engaged in this new endeavor. In fact, the process of creating a Strategic Plan through extensive consultation should itself help to create those communities. But NIFAL should also nurture them by keeping all partners apprised of the progress each is making and facilitating interaction among them. In some cases, this communication may take the form of websites tracking new plans and developments, databases, and interactive computer systems. In addition, NIFAL should convene meetings and taskforces of leaders and practitioners around topics of strategic importance. It could also use the Strategic Plan to build leadership communities by convening one or more national conferences when it releases the Plan and its annual reports.

Inevitably there will be barriers to implementing the Strategic Plan due to lack of alignment of the policies, procedures, and resources of different agencies, or gaps in knowledge about how to attain particular ends. Although no agency can dictate how these barriers should be overcome, NIFAL can facilitate their resolution by bringing the interested parties together to promote negotiated solutions. In some cases, simply identifying a problem in a clear and impartial way and convening key players may be sufficient to resolve problems. But, in other cases, this will not be enough. NIFAL should also be prepared to foster collaboration by bringing new resources to the table – drawing upon the experience and knowledge it will develop as it performs its various functions, initiating new research to shed light on particular problems, broadening the discussion to include partners that can contribute to solutions, and other means often used by mediators.

Of course, coordination consists of concrete support as well as trouble-shooting. Some partners will launch their own initiatives in program and policy development, research, and technical assistance, with these activities targeted on components of the system or issues closely related to it. Indeed many have already done so. For example, at the national level ED and DOL have launched an array of demonstration programs to test ideas for career pathway systems. The National Governor's Association has begun a program of technical assistance to states on career pathways, a longstanding interest of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). The AACC is also certain to gain momentum as a result of President Obama's call for innovation in expanding community college service. Groups representing Workforce Investment Boards, immigrants, and many other constituencies could be added to this list.

Co-Investing. NIFAL can support efforts such as these by helping to disseminate their findings. But in some cases, NIFAL should take a more pro-active role by *servicing as an investment fund* to support the development of an adult education and workforce skills system. In this capacity, where necessary, it should co-invest in the initiatives of other agencies or groups in the education and training field (such as career pathway programs) to be sure that they are designed to serve low-skilled adults. Often this is an overlooked or minor emphasis of such initiatives, but it can easily be incorporated into otherwise excellent efforts. By “buying into” work initiated by others, NIFAL can multiply the resources devoted to building an adult education and workforce skills system in a cost-effective way and create a wide sense of ownership in that system.

NIFAL should also engage in co-investment to promote institutional development. In the United States, there are many nascent centers of expertise in various forms of adult education and workforce skills development. For example, a number of universities and private research institutes have expertise on the principles of adult learning, ESL, labor market analysis, and other key components of the desired system. But they have not brought these to bear on the issues of helping low-skilled adults advance in the workforce. NIFAL could play a strategically important role by seeding the further development of these centers of expertise. Likewise, a number of philanthropies have invested in issues related to adult education and workforce development, and more are reaching out to do so. NIFAL should encourage this type of investment by suggesting ideas to private foundations and others and by offering to co-invest with them in launching or extending strategically important initiatives.

Finally, NIFAL should serve as an advocacy and information center for public and private agencies that want to develop components of an adult education and workforce skills system. It should join forces with federal agencies to propose policy changes or make funding requests to Congress needed by the agencies to implement the Strategic Plan. At the state and local levels, it can play an analogous “friend of the court” role as well.

(3) Developing Service Through New Initiatives

Although much of NIFAL’s agenda can be accomplished with or through others, there will always be gaps in the adult education and workforce skills system that cannot be filled by any one agency because they require investments in the system’s overall infrastructure. NIFAL should take the initiative to address these gaps.

President Obama recently identified two examples of this infrastructure investment in his proposals to strengthen community colleges. He cited the need to expand the use of instructional technology for distance learning, supporting classroom instruction, and system management. He also called for longitudinal data systems that provide results-oriented data, recognizing that this information is needed to assess the progress of learners (in the interest of accountability), identify bottlenecks in the system, and improve programs or take them to scale.

But the President’s proposals with regard to information technology and longitudinal data are not adequate to support a comprehensive adult education and workforce skills system if they are

confined to community colleges. The same logic that indicates the need for technology and multi-year data to strengthen the community college system applies to all aspects of a new adult education system. These tools are essential to all provider organizations that teach elementary literacy, English language skills, and more advanced basic and workplace skills, and that offer transition programs into occupational training, postsecondary education, and jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.

Use of Technology. For example, CAAL's forthcoming review of technology for adult learning reveals there is a superabundance of systems, products, and services that could be brought together to expand and accelerate the reach of virtually all aspects of adult education and workforce skills development. This wealth of resources is the result of innumerable public and private investments in the use of technology. But to have a substantial impact, this national investment must be made accessible to end-users. It needs to be evaluated for its effectiveness on particular target audiences, disseminated to users, and supplemented with technical assistance (probably by state leaders). In addition, gaps in the existing body of expertise must be identified and filled. Technology efforts have been developed over the years in a fragmented way. No one agency has the ability to assess what we already know and can do to make the best use of technology in an integrated adult education and workforce skills system, or to determine what we need to do in the future.

We propose, as does the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act, that NIFAL should lead the development of a systematic effort to gain the full benefits of technology for all types of adult learning. It should begin by developing one or more web portals to disseminate expertise and available products in a user-friendly way. But it should also support research and development to assess the best strategies for using this material, identify gaps in knowledge and the menu of options available, and support projects to fill those gaps. If NIFAL is legislatively mandated to take the leadership in building a comprehensive adult education and workforce skills system that links a wide range of public and private efforts (as proposed above), it is the logical agency to take the leadership in helping all partners in that system make better use of technology. Congress should specifically authorize NIFAL to perform this function and provide it with the necessary resources. But NIFAL should not duplicate the work of others. If there is a national investment in developing instructional technology for colleges, for instance, as

the President has proposed, NIFAL should collaborate with that initiative and seek to expand its reach.

Longitudinal Data. In the case of longitudinal data systems, there is also a dispersed body of expertise. ED's Institute for Education Sciences has conducted longitudinal research on elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. DOL's Bureau of Labor Statistics has expertise in identifying the economic benefits of investments in education. At the state level, Florida has developed a unified student record system that allows longitudinal research on enrollees at any level of its public education system. But these and other bits and pieces of unaligned activity do not constitute an integrated national longitudinal student tracking system that can support development of an adult education and workforce skills system – a system that is accountable to students, programs, and entities that invest in them.

A system of this sort would inevitably be multi-tiered. For example, at the national level it might link a refined version of the ED's National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) to the reporting systems of WIA Title I, TANF, and postsecondary education. At the local or state level, it should provide program managers and teachers, as well as state administrators, feedback on the effectiveness of their work and help them to assess innovative approaches. Many groups at all levels will have to collaborate in establishing and implementing the precise specifications for such a system. But someone must quarterback this team. Because of its mandate to coordinate the work of all these groups in developing an adult education and workforce skills system, the new NIFAL is the logical agency to assume this responsibility.

(4) Improving the State of the Art in Adult Education

To perform the functions set forth above, NIFAL will have to reach beyond traditional adult education to work with a wide range of workforce skills development groups. But even as it does this, improving the traditional adult education enterprise is essential and must remain a part of its mission. NIFL's original mission was to strengthen the nation's programs, policies, and practices for providing adult basic education, adult secondary education, and adult ESL instruction. By most measures, none of these elements are as effective as they ought to be. Each needs to be addressed in its own right, in a way that makes adult educators fully effective partners with others in the adult education and workforce skills system.

As a first step, NIFAL should revive and reinvigorate past NIFL activities that disseminated research, best practices, instructional tools, and other information to practitioners and policymakers. The LINCS system and online discussion forums were and are among the functions most valued by the adult education field and they were highly rated by an independent evaluation in 2005. [See NIFL website at www.NIFL.gov.] These moderate-cost, high impact forms of upgrading adult education service should be revived and carried out on an even larger scale. Moreover, NIFAL should co-invest in partnerships with other adult education and workforce skills groups that are working to improve the state of the art – such as CLASP, COABE, Jobs for the Future, Literacy Powerline, NAEPDC (an offshoot of the state directors of adult education), the National Coalition for Literacy, ProLiteracy, TESOL, and various quality improvement efforts sponsored by federal agencies, especially ED, DOL, and HHS. In fact, it should serve as a clearinghouse for these disparate efforts. The principal stakeholders in the adult education and workforce skills areas as well as those who may wish to invest in it, such as philanthropic groups, would benefit from this service.

NIFAL should also invest in research and development to address at least some of the issues that have long frustrated progress in adult education, some of which are listed in the laundry lists of “duties” attached to NIFL’s 1991 and 1998 authorizations and to proposals to reauthorize it. These issues include: (a) finding better ways to accelerate learning basic skills through high intensity instruction and other means, (b) creating the specifications for and supporting development of improved tools to assess student learning and program effectiveness, (c) addressing issues of certification and credentialing, (d) working to expand the GED’s scope and alignment with new system outcomes, (e) supporting activities to develop more robust professional development services, and (f) improving program approaches for serving special populations. The national adult education and workforce skills development system will require adult educators to develop wholly new curricula, measures of competence, service sequences, and skill sets. To this end, it will be necessary to establish partnerships with other entities that extend far beyond those typically involved in traditional adult education services.

In addition to generating a more precise list of research and development topics – which ought to be done as part of its strategic planning function – NIFAL should also propose investments, resources, and policies needed to accomplish national research, development, dissemination,

and technical assistance goals. And it should identify the public and private agencies to take responsibility for various aspects of the new adult education agenda, what partnerships between agencies will be required, and how they might be structured.

The goal of strategic planning for these purposes is to create a systematic, comprehensive, and coordinated multi-year effort to develop the new education and training services required. This planning process should incorporate *existing* efforts at the national, state, and local levels and propose how (if necessary) they should be expanded and taken to scale. In addition, as noted above, NIFAL should support the implementation of this work plan by convening cross-agency, federal-state-local, and public-private working groups as required to carry out its various elements, with close attention to areas where other federal agencies are unable to do so. Where other agencies *are* already performing these functions, NIFAL should support their work by dissemination of findings, advocacy of their initiatives in both the public and private spheres, and co-investment where appropriate.

F. GOVERNANCE

To perform the mission set forth above, NIFAL will have to be a truly independent, agile, innovative, and activist organization under strong management, and it must have the resources and standing to be a leader and full partner in the development of a national adult education and workforce skills system. As the discussion of NIFL's history above indicates, it has had none of these qualities.

To accomplish its new and critically important mission, NIFAL will need a new governance structure. We propose that NIFL should be reauthorized, on the condition that the following changes are made in its governance and related matters. Because these proposals are linked to each other and to the agency's new mission, we believe that the essential elements of all of them should be adopted if NIFAL is to be effective. In the form set out below, we assume that NIFL/NIFAL will be restructured as part of WIA's reauthorization, but if this is not feasible, the same proposals can be implemented in slightly different forms by other legislative initiatives.

- NIFL's name should be changed to the National Institute for Adult Learning (NIFAL), or some equivalent, to reflect its enlarged mission and responsibilities. It is worth noting that this produces a pronounceable acronym that also has immediate familiarity and name

recognition throughout the fields of adult education and workforce skills development. It is also sufficiently generic to embrace all aspects of adult education and workforce skills development.

- All management aspects for the new NIFAL should be vested in its own Board. As explained above, the system of “divided governance” (in which responsibility for the management of NIFL is shared by an Interagency Group and an advisory Board) has hobbled the agency since it was first created. Divided governance has created a leadership vacuum in which neither the advisory Board nor the Interagency Group has been able to fulfill its responsibilities to ensure that NIFL has a strong and effective agenda. OVAE has filled this vacuum, but helping NIFL to become an effective organization has not been one of its priorities. Moreover, due to its many other obligations and internal agendas, OVAE is not well suited to perform this task.

To effectively carry out its enlarged mission and responsibilities, the new NIFAL requires a strong governance structure, which can be achieved by vesting management responsibility in a single Board that focuses solely on achieving the mission and has the authority to create an organization to achieve it. This new board should exercise the usual responsibilities of a governing board including, but not limited to, establishing the criteria for and appointing staff, and establishing the Institute’s policies, programs, budgets, and operating procedures. It should adopt an annual budget and operating plan, approve or disapprove key decisions by management, approve or disapprove expenditures (including the letting of contracts), and in general oversee the management performance.

- The NIFAL Board should consist of three Founding Members and nine Expert Members. The Founding Members should be the Secretaries of Education, Labor, and HHS or their designees.⁵ Any designee should be an official of the Department headed by the Founding Member who makes the designation and who has the rank of Assistant Secretary or higher. Within two months of the enactment of legislation authorizing NIFAL, each Founding

⁵ As part of its coordination responsibilities, NIFAL and its Board should develop strong communications ties to other agencies of federal government that operate one or more adult education programs as part of their agendas – e.g., the Departments of Commerce, Defense, Justice, and Veterans Affairs.

Member should nominate three Expert Members to the President for appointment with the advice and consent of the Senate.

- Expert Members should be individuals who are not employees of the federal government. Authorizing legislation should state that these Members must be leaders in fields such as research, state government, business, labor, and postsecondary education, as well as leaders of professional associations and CBOs, and practitioners in adult education, workforce skills development, and related fields who have a high level of specialized knowledge of NIFAL's areas of responsibility.
- Authorizing legislation should state that the Board will have a quorum to do business at such time as a majority of its Expert Members have been appointed. The Secretary of Education should be legislatively mandated to coordinate the process of transmitting nominations of Expert Members to the President in a timely way and to convene the first meeting of the Board within 60 days of the time at which a quorum is formed. At that meeting the Board shall elect its officers and Chair and take such other steps as are required to commence the operations of NIFAL.
- Authorizing legislation should stipulate that the Board shall meet frequently (for example, at least four times a year), and upon the call of its Chair or the Director of the Institute. It shall designate one meeting as its Annual Meeting – at which time it shall review the Institute's activities and expenditures for the year and work with the Director to develop a plan of activities and budget for the next two years.

These provisions would unify the existing NIFL Interagency Group and advisory Board into a single governing board. The Interagency Group would be eliminated as a separate entity, although the NIFAL Board may decide to establish sub-committees for specialized purposes and the Founding Members may comprise one of these sub-committees.

Placing the federal agencies principally responsible for adult education and workforce development on NIFAL's governing Board and empowering each of them to nominate the

initial⁶ group of Expert Members should give the agencies a stronger sense of ownership in the new organization and a stronger stake in its success than they have felt under the arms-length management arrangement of the Interagency Group. As full members of the NIFAL Board all of them will bear responsibility for ensuring that the new agency achieves its legislatively mandated mission and will be answerable to the President and Congress if it does not. Membership on a unified Board should also encourage the Founding Members to use NIFAL as a mechanism for systematic interagency collaboration. The inclusion of members from all three agencies and elimination of the Interagency Group should put an end to the existing system of de facto single member agency governance.

For agencies where creation of an integrated adult education and workforce skills system has been a secondary priority, this Board structure should provide a means to achieve that goal that does not distract management attention and resources from their primary missions. And the availability of co-investment funds from NIFAL should provide them with an additional incentive to support its work.

The rationale for including Expert Members on the NIFAL Board is the same as it has always been – to enlist some of the best and most experienced people in the country in charting the directions of the organization and to foster the public and private partnerships at the federal, state, and local levels, all essential for creation of an integrated adult education and workforce skills system. The number of Expert Members might be greater or smaller than suggested above. The most important considerations should be their levels of expertise and the varied perspectives they bring to the table from outside the Beltway.

- It is important to specify a timetable for nominating Board members and convening the first meeting of the NIFAL Board. To ensure that NIFAL gets off to a sound start promptly, authorizing legislation for NIFAL should request that nominations be submitted to the President not less than 90 days after that legislation takes effect.

⁶ At the outset, ensuring the quality of the Expert Members will be the responsibility of the Founding Members who will serve with them; subsequent Board make-up, apart from federal representatives, will be the responsibility of the full Board.

- To ensure accountability, the Board should submit its annual budget and plan to Congress and the President. And it should issue an annual report to the President, Congress, all federal agencies, and the general public on its activities, accomplishments, revenues, and expenditures in the previous fiscal year as well as an operational plan and budget for each of the next two fiscal years. As required, NIFAL should submit financial and programmatic information to OMB, and be subject to any evaluations and audits requested by the President or Congress.
- NIFAL’s Director should have day-to-day responsibility for managing NIFAL. The Director should be appointed by the Board and compensated at the level of a federal agency director or Assistant Secretary (Level IV of the Executive Schedule). He or she will be the key individual responsible for developing NIFAL’s operational and financial plans, submitting them to the Board, implementing its agenda, and dealing on a peer basis with the highest-level leaders in the public and private sectors. The Director should thus be a person of public stature, accomplishment, and ability. The Board should conduct a thorough and open search for the person to fill this position, and that person should be compensated at a level commensurate with their responsibilities.
- The NIFAL Director and Board should develop criteria for professional staff and implement a system of competitive hiring.
- All WIA provisions and all administrative agreements negotiated without expressed legislative authority that confer special status on NIFL should be retained for NIFAL (such as maintaining separate offices, use of the mails, exemptions from certain provisions of the Civil Service Laws, and the ability to let contracts in its own right).
- Similarly, all records, equipment, operating systems, and other property, as well as any unexpended funds appropriated for NIFL, should be transferred to NIFAL.

G. FUNDING

Many aspects of NIFAL’s mission will require costly, multi-year commitments – such as strategic planning and follow-up, supporting the expansion of technology for adult education, and launching substantial research projects with or without partners. To undertake these and

other aspects of its mission, NIFAL must be assured of an adequate and stable source of baseline funding, and it should not have to rely on the budgetary judgments of any other agency.

At present, NIFL is authorized by WIA to receive 1.5% of all Title II funding. We believe that the most effective way to be sure that NIFAL has adequate and secure funding is to increase the percentage set-aside and establish a floor for funding within WIA (or equivalent enabling legislation).

- We recommend that 2.5% of all funds appropriated by Title II of WIA, but an amount not less than \$25 million, should be set aside for NIFAL – although other bases against which a set-aside might be calculated are possible (such as funding from other Titles of WIA due to NIFAL’s cross-agency responsibilities).⁷

Because much of NIFAL’s work will consist of partnerships with other agencies and new initiatives to implement the Strategic Plan it develops, it is difficult to calculate in advance the precise funding level required for NIFAL’s operation. The process of developing a Strategic Plan with full consultation of all affected parties could by itself require several million dollars. NIFL’s past appropriation of about \$6 million per year was barely adequate to support its clearinghouse and technical assistance activities plus a few larger initiatives primarily restricted to some areas of traditional adult education.

The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act authorizes \$7.5 million for the National Institute to carry out leadership functions in the use of technology. Other priority initiatives, such as the development of longitudinal data systems might prove to be as costly. Finally, to serve effectively as a supporting partner with other public and private agencies, NIFAL must bring several million dollars to the table (and to enhance its capacity to promote and participate in partnerships, its enabling legislation should be cast in a way that encourages and permits funding to flow to NIFAL from outside philanthropic sources).

⁷ The AEEGA proposes \$850 million for Title II in 2010. At 2.5% this would generate \$21 million for NIFL if the appropriation equals the amount authorized. On behalf of the National Commission on Adult Literacy, CAAL recommends that the 2010 authorization for Title II be lifted to \$1.5 billion, with incremental additions in out-years through 2020. AT 2.5% this would generate \$37.5 million in 2010. In contrast, a 1.5% set-aside would generate \$12.5 million for NIFAL at \$850 million and \$22.5 million at \$1.5 billion. CAAL believes that both amounts are too little for NIFAL to perform its past functions (retained by the AEEGA) and the substantial new functions proposed by the AEEGA and set forth in the expanded mission outlined in this paper.

Taking all of these considerations into account, we estimate that NIFAL will require at least \$25 million per year to achieve its mission. Also, if and when total public and private investment in the adult education and workforce skills system increases, NIFAL's responsibilities will increase. In an expanded system, more service providers and types of service will need to be included in NIFAL's information dissemination and technical assistance effort. In addition, more adequate funding for the new adult education and workforce skills system will provide both the opportunity and the imperative for more innovative partnerships and infrastructure support.

NIFAL's growth as the leadership agency for the adult education and workforce skills system should be proportionate to the growth of that system. CAAL has proposed that the AEEG Act authorize Title II of WIA at the level of at least \$1.5 billion for 2010 and that authorizations and appropriations grow annually thereafter to support needed service expansion and development as called for by the National Commission on Adult Literacy. At that level, the recommended 2.5% set-aside would result in an appropriation of \$37.5 million for NIFAL in 2010. But because the level of Title II funding that will be authorized is uncertain at the present time, and because appropriations are always uncertain, we propose that a base level authorization of \$25 million be established for the new NIFAL.

H. CONCLUDING NOTE

History provides many analogies for the potential and perils of this moment of opportunity. One of our working group members pointed to NASA as comparable.

When President Kennedy established the national goal of sending men to the moon and returning them safely, all branches of the armed services, other government agencies, and the private sector had programs and expertise in rocketry and the other aspects of science and technology required. And they have continued those efforts to meet their particular goals since that time. But it required a single agency to focus that expertise on a singular national goal. Fortunately, Congress had established NASA to orchestrate similar missions in the past. NASA is, of course, a line agency that does more than provide coordination and vision. It also controlled the entire process of the moon landing through its own research and product development.

Similarly, the necessary line agencies are in place to create an adult education and workforce skills system. But leadership that focuses on all aspects of this goal and proceeds with a coherent, integrated system in mind is missing. The new NIFAL is the ideal entity to provide that much-needed leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS (Project Co-Directors)

Gail Spangenberg (President, Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy) founded CAAL in 2001. In 2006, she initiated and managed the National Commission on Adult Literacy study of adult education, whose *Reach Higher, America* report was released in June 2008. She has since directed CAAL's follow-up and implementation activities. Prior to forming CAAL, Ms. Spangenberg served lengthy terms as chief operating officer of the Business Council for Effective Literacy and program officer in nontraditional education at the Ford Foundation. She was a member of the Harold Howe II team that studied the governance, funding, and facilities needs of the City University of New York (for Mayor Koch). She has directed several major studies, including a study of the New York State Regents External Degree and College Proficiency Examinations Program, and written widely on adult education and open learning. She had a instrumental role in development of the National Literacy Act of 1991, including its provisions for creation of the National Institute for Literacy.

Forrest Chisman (Senior Vice President, Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy) has been a CAAL principal since 2001, where he has directed major studies of adult ESL and of adult education-community college transitions. Before joining CAAL, Dr. Chisman was president of the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, where he conducted research and analysis on human resource development and wrote the *Jump Start* report that generated the National Literacy Act of 1991. He has worked extensively in adult education and literacy, job training, welfare policy, and other aspects of human resource development. In the 1980s he directed the Project on the Federal Social Role and the Commission on Federalism and National Purpose. He held two appointments in the Carter Administration (deputy associate administrator for policy, and director of planning and policy coordination in the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration.) He served as senior program officer at the Markle Foundation and has written extensively.

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